WASHINGTON POST

13 APR 1972

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Books

A General's Mind

SWORDS AND PLOWSHARES.
By Gen. Maxwell D. Taylor.
(Norton, 434 pp., illustrated, $10)

Reviewed by
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The reviewer, a fellow at the Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars, is co-author of "The Secret Search for Peace in Vietnam." He is currently writing a book on the American military establishment in the post-Vietnam War era.

Here's a book that tells you just what makes a Joint Chief tick, a book that is a clear self-revelaton of a senior military man's life, thought processes, and perception of his times.

It's an honest book but, to one interested in the demilitarization of American foreign policy, a discomforting one. It's a frank book but, to one convinced that our service leaders must be soldier-statesmen in fact as well as title, it reveals the difficulty of fusing those two functions successfully.

To begin at the end, Taylor sums up 47 years of public service by taking a look at the future. He foresees the United States entering a new Cold War period as a declining power. He writes:

"A first step is to recognize the new Cold War technique directed against the sources of our power as a formidable threat to our national security. This form of threat is not new in its weapons—propaganda, subversion, power seizures by minorities. But the acuteness of the threat is new because of the increasing strength and boldness of the internal revolutionary movement and the mind-numbing power of press and television in their effect on the critical judgment of the public. This threat strikes at the roots of national power, particularly at our national unity, without which we are an easy target for all enemies, large and small, foreign and domestic. To cope with it, we need a new concept of national security, broad enough to assure that defensive measures are taken against subversion in this form . . ."

As a declining power, he says, the United States can either adjust its international goals downward, as did Great Britain, or it can continue to maintain its war-making capacities for all-out as well as limited war. He issues this caveat, however: if the nation ever again gets involved in limited war the President should obtain a declaration of war from Congress and then go all out to achieve the goal. "The resources allocated and their use in combat should be limited only by the requirements of prompt victory," he writes.

All of this is gloomy stuff, particularly as it comes from the urbane, articulate, widely traveled linguist who was chosen in the early 1960s to be the number one soldier on the New Frontier. In 1972, Taylor reveals himself as a man given to views somewhat to the right of Spiro T. Agnew. On just one matter, that of the press's role and performance in recent years, Agnew's criticism appears moderate in comparison with Taylor's.

Schooled in the Old Army of pre-World War II, seasoned as a combat commander and high-level staff man in Gen. George C. Marshall's Pentagon and Dwight D. Eisenhower's European Theater, Taylor came into his own during the Korean War. To use today's vernacular, he had all his tickets punched to perfection.

His was an exciting career: he parachuted into Normandy as a Division Commander on D-Day; he made a secret trip behind enemy lines in Italy in 1943 to negotiate with the post-Mussolini government; he was responsible for the possibility of landing the 82nd Airborne Division near Rome to defend that city against the Germans.

It was also an important one. He served as superintendent of West Point and Berlin garrison commander under President Truman; as 8th Army Commander in Korea and Army Chief of Staff under Eisenhower; as chairman of the Joint Chiefs under John F. Kennedy; and as Ambassador to Saigon for one crucial year under Lyndon B. Johnson.

Taylor is a man who clearly did his homework—arriving in Korea in 1953 to take over field command of all United Nations troops there, he had a piece of paper outlining the mission as he perceived it; returning to Washington a few years later to become chief of staff of the Army, he had already drafted a new program for the service. And he clearly studied his lessons: For example, he extracts these, among others, from the Korean War:

"A central theme was the importance of learning to use our military resources effectively in limited war . . . In combination the enemy, the terrain and the weather tended to nullify the usefulness of much costly equipment procured during and after World War II in preparation for another world war, presumably to be fought primarily in Western Europe . . .

"The absence of an enemy air force or navy limited the useful employment of much of our air and naval strength . . . In the absence of a naval adversary, the mightiest warships of the world were obliged to content themselves with bombarding unimportant shore targets hardly worthy of their shells."

One can imagine Generals William C. Westmoreland or Creighton Abrams, Jr., writing such paragraphs in their memoirs a few years from now. Why did not Taylor, who had great influence on Vietnam war policy, work more actively to make sure that Korean War mistakes were not repeated in Vietnam? And one wonders, in considering Taylor's thought processes, why he does not try to explain to his readers—or himself—why weapons should be used at all if the targets are hardly worthy of them.

The point is that while Taylor extracted lessons from his experienced, he gives little indication that he applied them. Another example: In May, 1961, he conducted a post-mortem of the Bay of Pigs invasion that led Kennedy to conclude that the Joint Chiefs did not give him advice on a broad enough basis. The following October, Kennedy sent him to Vietnam with Walt W. Rostow under orders to determine how best to engineer the rescue from disaster fo President Ngo Dinh Diem.

"I was not asked to review the objectives of this policy but the means being pursued for their attainment," Taylor writes. "The question was how to change a losing game and begin to win, not how to call it off."

Even if the President did not specifically ask for views on whether the game was worth winning, does not a soldier-statesman have the responsibility to investigate a question such as that and present his views?

As professional soldier-statesmen, the Joint Chiefs must be more than advisers on, and devisers of, ways to "counter threats." They must also have a deep understanding of just what the threats are. Nowhere in his book does Taylor show an appreciation for the nature of the Communist system he was so busy containing during the last half of his career.

Traditionally, troop command has been a prerequisite for membership on the Joint Chiefs. Why not educate them as well in countries perceived as potential enemies—say, as military attaches or in some other experience-broadening capacity? That should be as indispensible a ticket punch in a soldier-statesman's career pattern as troop command.

A future Joint Chiefs member who had a real first-hand knowledge of the "Communist threat," as did say, "Vinegar Joe" Stilwell, who never became a Joint Chief, would ndeed be a refreshing novelty.